

# Blue Books for Formative Assessments and More

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## Introduction

In reading through the Handbook of Classroom Assessment Techniques (1), I found lots of great ideas about brief writing assignments that could be used to gauge what students were actually learning, i.e., formative assessment. Other literature on teaching and assessment had further ideas for nudging students to examine their own learning (2, 3). An OnCourse newsletter touted the benefits of a Participation Journal (4), in which students wrote comments daily about what they had done to participate in class that day. I combined these ideas into a general purpose Blue Book activity in which students write nearly every class period in response to a variety of prompts.

## Methods

1. Every student has a large format (8 X 10 in) Blue Book. I have started buying them at the bookstore and reselling them in class, just to ensure that all students have one by the second class meeting.
2. Have them print their name in large block letters across the top front of the book. This makes it easy for them to retrieve their own book at the beginning of class. For smaller classes, you can hand them out as they enter and learn student names that way.
3. At any time during class, pose a question or some type of prompt and ask them to write a response. Suggestions are given in the next section.
4. Collect the books at the end of class, with the current page open on top. This saves time in having to find the current entry in each book.
5. Review the comments (see further notes below) and stamp the page. No gradebook entry is needed at this time.
6. Return the books at the beginning of the next class session, and repeat. When the books are full, credit each student by totaling the number of stamps in their book. Only one entry in the grade sheet is needed.

## Writing Prompts

The choice of writing prompt depends on my purpose for that day. The reference list provides sources that I have used. Examples are:

- *What part of the reading assignment was most confusing to you?* (a good one for early in the term to alert them that they really must prepare for class)
- *What assumptions are part of this experiment?* (to spur them to critical thinking and to challenge conclusions)
- *How do you define evolution?* (to expose their current conceptions; usually followed by class discussion)

Some questions aim at promoting self-reflection on their own learning

- *With which concept were you most engaged today?*
- *Which of your learning activities this week are you proudest of?*
- *Which study strategy was most effective for you on the exam?*
- *What can you now teach someone that you could not teach last week?*
- *What will you do to reduce your own risk of cancer?* (to stimulate personal reflection following a lecture on cancer and its causes)

## Reviewing Student Writings

My specific approach depends on the prompt and its purpose. The key is to make the process relatively rapid; I aim for 20 to 30 minutes per class of 30-45 students.

**Stamp only.** This is adequate for prompts followed by Pair-Share and whole class discussion. I like to have fun with using a variety of stamps related to a topic of the day.

**Write a brief response,** especially if the student seems concerned about something or just to initiate a dialog on an interesting topic. The large format (8 X 10") allows this to happen more easily and encourages the students to write more.

**Collate student responses and report back to the class.** I always do this if I have asked which topics are confusing to them.

## Results

How have the blue book assignments affected your learning? Students answered (in their Blue Books):

- *being able to think a little deeper about certain topics and include my ideas has been a good experience*
- *helped me stay focused in class because I know at the end of lecture there will be a question*
- *help to involve us in discussion by making us think for ourselves.*
- *it makes us think like scientists by coming up with our own theories.*
- *because it is private which makes me feel more comfortable with what I have to say*
- *forcing me to think critically with an open mind*
- *makes me read ahead so I am prepared*
- *good potential, but so far, no better learning*

## Conclusions

Regular use of blue books for in-class writing assignments can lead to broader participation in class discussions, more student practice with critical thinking, and better engagement with course material and the instructor. Question choice and feedback is crucial.

## References

1. Angela and Cross, Classroom Assessment Techniques 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Jossey Bass/Wiley 1993
2. Ken Bain, What the Best College Teachers Do, Harvard University Press, 2004
3. Stephen Brookfield, The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom, 2nd edition. Jossey Bass/Wiley 2006
4. On Course newsletter, Fall 2008